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Bill targets cruise waste disposal

Proposal would limit sewage

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OLYMPIA -- The drastic increase in cruise ship traffic in Washington waters requires tightened regulations to control pollution, lawmakers were told yesterday.

Since 1999, cruise ships have been visiting Puget Sound more frequently.

The number has risen from six port calls in 1999 to about 140 port calls expected to depart from Seattle this year on cruises to Alaska.

Based on laws in California and Alaska, the measure before lawmakers would limit discharge of treated and non-treated sewage from cruise ships. It also would require frequent testing of discharged materials.

If the owner or operator did not comply with the regulations, they could be fined up to \$25,000 per day per violation.

"All three of the states, Washington, California and Alaska, benefit economically from growing numbers of cruise ships," said the bill's primary sponsor, Rep. Mary Lou Dickerson, D-Seattle. "But, only Washington lacks enforceable laws to protect our waters against cruise ship discharges of waste and sewage."

House Bill 2549 would prohibit cruise ships from discharging sewage, oily bilge water and graywater. Graywater may include laundry water, bath water and dishwater.

Alaska state Rep. Beth Kerttula, D-Juneau, testified yesterday before the House Committee of Fisheries, Ecology and Parks in support of the Washington bill.

It is similar to an Alaskan measure that limited cruise-ship discharge, although that law allows cruise ships to dump graywater if the ship is one mile offshore and going at least 6 knots.

The Washington bill would also prohibit vessels from discharging treated sewage near a marine sanctuary.

It would regulate any commercial passenger vessel with overnight accommodations and 50 or more paying passengers attempting to dock at a Washington port.

Before entering Puget Sound, the owner or operator of the ship would be required to register annually with the state Ecology Department.

They also would have to sign an agreement to comply with state waste-discharge laws.

The bill contains a provision for alternatives to waste-discharge compliance.

The Ecology Department could establish an alternative agreement if the owner could produce equivalent environmental protection through other terms, if the owner or operator needed additional time or if the operator used experimental technology for pollution control providing more environmental protection.

In addition, the ship's operator would have to collect samples of discharged substances once a month.

To provide funds for the testing, each vessel would pay an "environmental compliance fee" per voyage in Washington.

The fee would not exceed \$1.75 per passenger.

Representatives from the Holland America cruise line and the Washington Public Ports Association spoke out against the bill. They favor a voluntary agreement created between the cruise lines and the Ecology Department.

Dan Grausz, vice president of the Seattle-based Holland America cruise line, testified against the legislation; he supported the voluntary agreement with the Ecology Department.

"Cruise lines are the first to recognize that we are guests wherever we call. We have a duty to protect the environment," Grausz said. "Our ships will reduce or avoid discharges to the extent that is unparalleled anywhere else in the United States, including Alaska, including California."

Negotiations on the "memorandum of understanding" are nearly complete and will take effect before cruise season begins this year while any legislation passed may not take effect until 2006, according to Wayne Grotheer, manager of corporate environmental programs for the Port of Seattle.

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David McCraney, environmental program manager for the Port of Seattle, said the house bill leaves a "doughnut hole" of water over three miles from shore north of Sequim Bay and south of Lopez Island, an area he says is regulated by the Coast Guard, not the state.

The bill would specifically prohibit discharges of untreated sewage and waste into the "marine waters of Washington," defined as "Puget Sound, the Strait of Juan de Fuca from the Washington coast to the Canadian border and coastal waters out to three miles from the Washington coast."

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